

## Saying “Yes” Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*\*

Marisa Parham

*Like other kinds of pain, phantom pain is a phenomenon known but not understood by medical professionals. Unlike other types of pain, no body part need be present for it to occur. Felt by amputees, it is an apparition, a ghost thought to exist only in the mind, as a memory unforgotten. But then, the problem with pain altogether is its invisibility. Maybe most pain is phantom pain... its existence does not always rely on a light spot, a shadow on an X-ray, or the frank evidence of blood. It belongs to the world hidden inside a boot, to secret histories of inner worlds, to beds where the sick are unseen, beds where human mystery, wounding, and love occur.*

— Linda Hogan

I remember the first time I taught Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*. It was an introductory literature course, one of those survey classes many college students take. It was our first day back after Spring Break, and in a class of nearly forty students, maybe ten had read the book. Determined to have a productive class, I put them into groups, where they had to come up with one example of an aspect of American history that had been excluded from the national narratives they had learned in high school. It was an incredibly diverse class, and I figured that each group would find it a challenge to agree on which story “deserved” to be told. The idea was that 1) it was a backdoor way to get them thinking about history, memory, and counter-memory, and 2) the diverse investments of each group member would make it difficult for the groups to themselves agree on a single example, thus illustrating some of the political relations between community memory, national history, and individual identity.

The groups were chugging along, and what I must admit began as a somewhat punitive exercise had become quite exciting and productive – though one of the groups was having more fun than group-work should ever produce. Two of the group’s members were in the midst of one of their elaborate comedy routines, this time reproducing their own version of the then oft-run television commercials for Colonial Williamsburg. Every commercial follows the same format: some child from the present meets some child from Colonial Williamsburg, who is always playing with some sort of eighteenth-century hoop and [1315] stick-type toy. Colonial girl says, in her vaguely accented English from the past, “Would you like to play with my hoop?” The two children are

matched in age, gender, race, and appearance, the only difference being their styles of dress, and of course, the lame toy. Suddenly, twentieth-century child, ready to conquer the alien object, takes the hoop, and (gasp) hula-hoops! The Williamsburg child is shocked and amazed, for of course we are supposed to believe that she is not a fictional character, and that Colonial Williamsburg is not merely a museum, but in fact a journey back through time. My local comedians had latched onto this last point and, departing from the notion that this could really be an encounter between children from different centuries, explored a simple proposition: what if the children were black? "Hello. Would you like to go pick some cotton with me?"; "Hey! You dere wanna play wit my shackles?" – and so on the shtick went. I am sure you can imagine. But with that simple joke, they had exposed the myth of Colonial Williamsburg, or perhaps more specifically, had reminded their classmates of the whitewashing necessary to making history commercially viable, commodifiable, in the present.

We laughed long and hard that day, indulging fully in the wry, almost tearful laughter that only a contest between insight and bitterness can bring. At the end of the day laughter usually chases such bitterness away, but I cannot help but wonder if any of us could have really identified the bitter root, despite the efficacy of our ritual expiation. Did it come from the fact that something akin to my students' version of history would never be included in a national narrative? Or from the fact that the absence of such stories do not make them any less real in their meaning to the present? Sardonic, ironic, we were jammed in the space between our indignation at being absented and the pain that sometimes comes with bringing the self back into recognition. Days later, as we finished *Obasan*, we talked about how neglected histories may sometimes go untold not only because "history is for the winners," or because history operates in the service of a national political majority, but also because, sometimes, people cannot bear to tell such stories or re-live such lives. The question, "Would you like to pick some cotton?" takes away historical wonder, takes away the possibility of play and enchantment with the past – for who could ever say "yes"?

The problem of the "yes," of affirming an historical identity that is potentially harmful to oneself, troubles some of the imaginative leaps necessary to students' processes of identification when reading, for if the most common rationale for representing violent and troubling histories is so that "we may learn from the past," how do we account for students' refusals to see themselves in such pasts? On some level I take issue with the notion that a reader is supposed to identify with a text in order to "enjoy" it, but when students, who very often begin their reading from the point of identification, avoid it, I cannot help but be intrigued. When teaching slave narratives, for instance, I am always struck by how students generally protect themselves from the texts, usually either by claiming deep admiration for the slave-protagonist, "She is so amazing. I *never* would have survived slavery," or by asserting their own necessarily acontextualized resistance: "That never would have been me. I would've killed somebody." As Lisa Long notes:

as student responses to these novels indicate, contemporary Americans – both white and African American . . . all want to imagine that we would be the defiant and brave African American slave or white Underground Railroad worker. We would not be the ones maimed or killed – surely not the ones doing the maiming and killing. (464) [1316]

In my own experiences of teaching slave narratives, I have often come up against the resistance that Long describes, though I must admit that I cannot recall a single instance when a student has willingly engaged with even the “good” white characters, much less engaged in an extended recognition of an aggressor or oppressor who could not in some way claim a victim status. It is typical for students to avoid identifications with slaves, but absolutely taboo for them to think too deeply about the slaveholders. If I am not careful, white people, except as a sort of shadowy, menacing force, are actively disappeared from class discussions. They are simply too difficult to deal with outside of their caricatures. Some of this, I think, has to do with classroom dynamics, with students’ fears of slipping down the slopes of racial discourse: explanation, insofar as it tends towards understanding, puts one at risk of outing oneself as a sympathizer with an oppressor – an outcome made even more risky in racially diverse or predominately white classrooms. This hesitation is on a certain level sensible; scholars as well often rear up before the possibility of a dangerous identification. Even if the students do not know why, they know that slavery and its proponents must be condemned, which is of course a reasonable and even “right” response. But, at the same time, not confronting oppressors, or even more specifically, not allowing oneself even for a moment to identify with an oppressor, potentially keeps one cloaked from one’s own horrible potentiality.

Indeed, Long’s last point, that “we” would “surely” never be the “ones doing the maiming and killing,” is critical, for even as any act of speaking for a victim – of putting oneself in the place of the victim – is fraught with the dangers of appropriative empathy or of painful haunting, speaking for an aggressor can be far more dangerous, as perhaps there is nothing more troubling than an even transitory identification with someone whom you would like to claim your soul speaks against. To do so is transgressive. But, at the same time, allowing ourselves to always identify only with victims not only undermines the very idea that troubling histories must live on for their learning, it also makes the doers of violence shadowy and elusive aberrations, spared the repudiation that comes with an actively rejected identification, having instead been absented from the very discourse their actions have engendered.<sup>1</sup> This absenting of the perpetrator can also lead to a fundamental misconception, to a sense that the perpetrators of the world’s great crimes somehow came unto their victims from elsewhere, that every instance of violence of whites against blacks during slavery, for instance, somehow reenacted the landing of Europeans on the African coast. The truth of American slavery, of course, is quite the opposite, as victims and perpetrators are seldom, if ever, alien to each other.

What genre, then, is more suited to exploding the myth of alien encounter than science fiction? As Octavia Butler has shown us, science fiction, so often misunderstood as the

province of white men and their green aliens, is useful to the task of thematizing some of the more haunting aspects of black experience in the Americas. In *Kindred*, the fourth of twelve novels published by Butler before her death in 2006, Butler uses one of speculative fiction's oldest imaginative devices, time travel, to map the often uncanny interlocutions of race, gender, and history germane to post-encounter worlds. [1317]

Published in 1979, *Kindred* is the first of only two standalone novels written by Butler, the second being her final novel, *Fledgling*, which was published in 2005. Though separated by a quarter century, it is interesting to note that Butler's standalones have more in common with each other than with her other texts more generally, for they bookend an ongoing set of concerns with how a traumatic experience potentially fragments an individual's sense of identity.<sup>2</sup> As the only texts set fully in Butler's writerly present, both novels offer readers a deeper sense of what is at stake in the constant and radical deconstruction of ostensibly imperative social and biological configurations that we witness in Butler's other novels – a queering and querying biopolitical project carried across two of her three serial narratives, the *Patternist* novels (1976–1984) and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987–1989) – which is to say a full eight of her twelve novels, as well as most of her short stories.<sup>3</sup>

Whether set in the distant past or the distant future, many of Butler's writings engage biological narratives – per her texts, the status of a body and its mechanisms, set in relation to both that body's social meaning in a given present and the possibility for what it might become in the future – as simultaneously mysterious and determinative, as empty-yet-full.<sup>4</sup> In *Fledgling* and *Kindred*, meanwhile, Butler offers protagonists who must survive the tension between understanding of their bodies as their “own” and also recognizing their bodies in relation to pasts that exceed, leak into, the present moment. In *Fledgling*, the body can be depended on to remember that which the mind must not, as the forgetting of traumatic experience allows Butler's protagonist safe passage into a new future. In *Kindred*, however, it is the body that revokes the future, bringing forth memories in excess of itself and bringing into question the very notion that any body might expect anything more than he or she has already ever been.

### Phantom Pain

*Kindred* is mostly Dana's story. Dana, a newly married black woman in 1970s Los Angeles, works as a temp, awaiting her big break as a writer. She is our protagonist *cum* tour guide, our girl with the hoop. The day Dana and her husband Kevin, who is white and also a writer, move into their new house, she falls to the floor, dizzy. When she awakens, she finds herself in antebellum Maryland. The first thing she sees is a drowning child, and, instinctively, she saves his life. When the boy's father arrives, he threatens her with a shotgun, and suddenly she is transported, wet and muddy, back to her present (13–14). This scene at the river is the first of many times Dana will be called to save Rufus Weylin's life, and the only way she can return to her present is to believe she is dying; though, inevitably, she will always be returned to the past, each time to save Rufus' life – which she must do. For even though Rufus is the

white child of a plantation owner, and when in the past Dana occupies the position of his slave, he is also her ancestor, a distant grandfather. Dana's obligation to Rufus' life, which is also an obligation to her own, structures the interplay of history and morality that motivates Butler's plot. If Rufus dies, Dana will never be born. Or rather, she cannot afford to find out what would happen to her if she were not to save him. By putting Dana in this dilemma, Butler is able to illustrate the deep and thorny entanglement at the heart of Southern plantation slavery, thus undoing any cultural myth of [1318] alien encounter. Further, by structuring the text around Dana's various obligations to life (her own, Rufus's, other slaves), Butler not only complicates the range of Dana's responses in any situation, but she also forces the reader to abide by the same rules.

The idea that different worlds abide by different rules is fundamental to science fiction, as well as to other kinds of speculative writing more generally. By engaging readers to understand the very specific contours of otherwise inaccessible places and times, such writing strives to make alien times and spaces comprehensible, working to assure the reader that what transpires in the text is indeed possible, no matter how experientially distant the terms of the novel might otherwise seem. In *Kindred*, Butler uses speculative writing's often hyperbolic stance—the genre's de facto commitment to writing from the limit of more regularly perceived experiences—to illuminate how African Americans could have survived enslavement in a world dedicated to what Keith Gilyard has referred to as “the devoicing and identity-eradicating imperatives of masters and overseers” (778).

In a 1997 *Callaloo* interview with Charles Rowell, Butler recalled the following:

I was occasionally taken to work with my mother and made to sit in the car all day, because I wasn't really welcome inside, of course. Sometimes, I was able to go inside and hear people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful. As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it. I didn't really understand. This is something I carried with me for quite a while, as she entered back doors, and as she went deaf at appropriate times. If she had heard more, she would have had to react to it, you know. The usual. (Interview 51)

When we say that we carry something with us, we often mean that we have brought into ourselves a burden someone else has given, a shaming. I imagine this thing that Butler carried with her “for quite a while” as a potent admixture of shame and anger, and as indicative of a generational gap widened by ideological transformations surfaced in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Every slight her mother seemingly ignores or, even worse, doesn't seem to mind, recapitulates Butler's anger. More than one black child has experienced this with parents or grandparents, this seeming deference to whiteness that is painful to watch and is in its tenor unfamiliar to his or her own experience of race. Butler, however, did have an explanation for her mother's behavior: “If she had heard more, she would have had to react to it, you know.

The usual." Here Butler's recollection hints at her understandably overdetermined assessment of her mother's situation, for it is clear that she had not come to it by observing her mother solely in terms of her real predicament, in terms of her mother's relation to their survival: "I wasn't really welcome inside, of course," "you know," "the usual": *as seen on tv*, as written in books. *You know*, the cultural memory; *you know*, of course, the usual way these things go.

But then, Butler adds,

. . . as I got older I realized that this is what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head. This is when I started to pay attention to what my mother and even more my grandmother and my poor great-grandmother, who died as a very young woman giving birth to my grandmother, what they all went through. (Interview 51) [1319]

Butler's matured relationship to the realities of survival moves her from condemnation to sympathy: "what they all went through," "my poor great-grandmother." And, by attending to those who have attended to the necessities of her own life, Butler comes to understand the specificity of their experiences of the world, their rules of survival. Even as she cannot know exactly what they went through, she *can* comprehend that they went as best as they knew how. This knowledge, despite its limits, lessens shame's burden and enables the transfer of her own anger to its proper object, to the "disgusting behavior" of the white employers.

Improving the lens through which her audience considers the past is an important part of Butler's project, as she attempts to make her readers, perhaps even black readers specifically, understand that in the same situation, they may not have done any differently than their ancestors. It seems fitting, then, that *Kindred* was first conceived as a pedagogical project:

When I got into college, Pasadena City College, the black nationalist movement, the Black Power Movement, was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people. He said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." When he said *us* he meant black people, and when he said *old people* he meant older black people. That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred* (1979). I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well. (Interview 51)

The problems and sorrows of living in the world grate against the monumentalizing tendencies of progressive revolutionary thought, particularly as popular revolutions are often at some level revolts against an historical shame, against a haunting that can only be expiated in death. But because Butler has come into a different new understanding of her generation's relation to its ancestors, she is in fact shamed by her peer's shame, which had been expressed in this instance as a destructive, killing rage. Shame always hearkens towards death, as the shamed believes that only death can erase the mark; *I was so ashamed, I wanted to die right on the spot*: "I'd like to kill all these old black people who have been holding us back for so long."

But to kill one's ancestors would mean to kill oneself, and it is this dilemma, made extravagantly literal, that *Kindred* tackles. With *Kindred* Butler works towards a strategy for passing on painful histories, as enacting the possibilities of world-making in literature is no small feat for texts that need their readers to engage the life-experiences of people who have suffered as many never will, particularly when that suffering implicates people with whom readers can identify – their own ancestors laid bare as *people*, as the subjects and objects of history. Dana's haunting experience of the past as the present is an experience of pain, horror, and disillusionment, coming at a nearly unsustainable cost. It is in this way [1320] that texts like *Kindred*, and neo-slave narratives more generally, attempt to move specific histories away from the silent and shameful not by representing history – that would be the work of historical fiction – but rather by bringing the historical past into the present tense, thus conjuring history's actualities – flesh, survival, and the things people do in the interest of the future. Such texts make readerly identification possible by making manageable the shame of one's encounter with the past. By creating a space where one can say yes, such encounters teach us how many have made the transition from victim to survivor.

### Screened History

In *Kindred*, there is a sense that Butler has also come to this knowledge through her own reading, for her reading seems very much on the surface of the text. As Robert Crossley has pointed out, the specters of some of the more heavily circulated slave narratives, like those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, bob and weave from beginning to end of Butler's own narrative (Crossley xx–xxii). Of course the idea that an author has culled the raw materials of her own fiction-making from other literary sources is hardly new or interesting, but something about Butler's writing suggests that her production of *Kindred* perhaps worked as its own kind of salve, that the book was written to negotiate her own experiences of reading and consequently being haunted by slave narratives. That what began as a pedagogical project has for its author become a therapeutic one.

Butler makes sure that we understand that reading and writing hold a central place in *Kindred*. Dana's first travel to Maryland, for instance, occurs when she, frustrated that she is stuck with housework while her husband Kevin gets to write, is unpacking their books into their new house (13). There is something important in this moment as Dana,

her hands on her books and her emotions revolving around her indignation, is momentarily suspended between her familiar, chosen life as a writer and her unfamiliar and unchosen role as a domestic. Butler immediately concretizes the uncanny sensation, as she makes the briefly unfamiliar domestic present double as the site of an unfamiliar domestic past, a slippery traversion made possible by the convergence of race, gender, and history – a convergence which, once revealed, resituates Dana's home as a place of danger and vulnerability: "I feel like it could happen again," she confesses, " – like it could happen anytime. I don't feel secure here" (17). As Crossley notes:

Shuttling between the two white men in her life, she is aware not only of the blood link between herself and Rufus but of the double link of gender and race that unites Rufus and Kevin. The convergence of these two white men in Dana's life not only dramatizes the ease with which even a "progressive" white man falls into the cultural pattern of dominance, but suggests as well an uncanny synonymy of the words "husband" and "master." (xix)

In the past Rufus enlists Dana as his amanuensis, which is painful both because it denudes Dana's passion for writing and also because it reminds her of Kevin's previous attempts to get her to do the same in their present.<sup>5</sup> Though they are both writers by trade, Kevin [1321] is the primary breadwinner, having recently had more luck publishing than Dana. Later in the novel, when Rufus asks Dana to take care of some of his work, it would almost be humorous, if the circumstances were not so dire, the implications so horrifying. Her experience of involuntary service catapults Dana into a past that is unfamiliar and also hers. As its haunting of her present emerges more fully into consciousness, her present is transformed into that past. Rather than leaving it in the past, she returns to it time and time again.

It is important that such return is not limited to Dana, for Butler makes it clear that this transportation is available to anyone with the right kind of access to the right kind of text. After Dana returns from the past the second time, she and Kevin begin collecting and devouring every book they can acquire about slavery, delving in with a passion that would seem obsessive if it were not for the special circumstances of Dana's time travel. They are determined that if she must go, then at least she can be as educated as possible about the time space to which she travels. When her transportations first began, Dana was more familiar with the literature and history of slavery than Kevin. But when faced with Dana's travel, Kevin works hard to learn more about the specificities of her predicament, an effort Butler validates – for lack of a better term – with a trip to the past with Dana. It is important, however, that Kevin can only time-travel if he is touching Dana, thus suggesting that *she* is in fact the text that matters. One night, Rufus tells her about a moment when he briefly saw her in *her* present, "I saw you inside a room. I could see part of the room, and there were books all around" (22). By literally making Dana's body a text, that which holds the narrative, Butler suggests that one can only travel to a past about which one has a prior memory-sense, through which one is already haunted.



It is in Butler's articulation of the body's relationship to the vicissitudes of reading, writing, and education that we thus find *Kindred's* central paradox. In her novel Butler creates for us a world in which the comprehension of history is only possible through bodily, actualized, experience—even as the conditions for such experiences are consolidated in her characters' acts of reading, through the reading of books that can never themselves approximate the lived experiences in which they are based.

In *Kindred*, this paradox is played out as a radical temporal disjuncture between the two timespaces. When Dana and Kevin are together in either timespace, they experience time in the same way. But when only one is in 1815, for instance, the one left behind in 1976 experiences the other's absence as roughly equivalent to the amount of time it would have taken for him or her to read about what transpired in the other's life in the past, thus illustrating within *Kindred* the difference between the time of living and the time of reading. What to Dana feels like two hours in 1815 feels like just minutes to Kevin, feels just as long as it would take to read this page.

Through her constant reiteration of this temporal disjuncture, Butler insists that there is no possibility for an experience of the past outside of first-person experience, for even time, relative to the individual, refuses synchronicity in spite of any notion of a reader coming to knowledge through story. The author can never herself touch the life of her protagonist, and like her own reader she is thus inadequate to the task of writing. If one were to believe *Kindred's* theorization of its own terms, Butler would in fact be nothing more than an amanuensis to the past, merely transcribing the past as it transpires. And indeed, such privileging of daily, bodily, lived experience is central to the African American [1322] expressive tradition: *Shit is real. The real deal. That's keeping it real.* Nevertheless, this idea that one must physically experience history in order to have any knowledge of it puts at risk the very idea of reading and writing about the past. Even Dana herself, recently returned from Maryland, realizes that "As real as the whole episode was, as real as I know it was, it's beginning to recede from me somehow. It's becoming like something I saw on television or read about—like something I got second hand" (17).

Despite the ways Butler foregrounds reading, it is important to note that when Dana arrives in the past, she soon learns that her own education—her book learning, her reading, and the movies she has seen—are inadequate to the task of actually living in an unfamiliar time and space: "I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their friends and themselves" (36). Despite the voraciousness of her reading, Dana finds herself profoundly unfamiliar with the everyday things that go unglossed, including the extraordinary event of escape, one of the most notably undocumented aspects of slave life. After she is captured in her attempted escape, she admits "I knew about towns and rivers miles away—and it hadn't done me a damned bit of good! What had Weylin said? That educated didn't mean smart. He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me escape" (176).

Immediately, however, history comes to recoup at least a little bit of Dana's loss: "Yet in a few years an illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into this country and lead three hundred fugitives to freedom" (177). Dana, severely beaten and failed in her escape attempt, turns to the past's future, her other history, for comfort. In terms of flow, this moment is one of *Kindred's* choppiest, if not actually insensible, moments. Neither narratively nor emotionally does the statement fit the text's momentum, but it is nonetheless an absolutely fascinating moment because it marks Butler's attempt to recuperate personal loss via historical citation. On the level of the text, this replacement feels like an intrusion, the place where, if Dana were on a therapist's couch, one would find an obdurate screen memory, a psychic panacea that attempts to move the reader away from the truth of the protagonist's reality. In this way, *Kindred* is situated between reading's virtual satisfactions and the limits of such satisfaction. Through her experience, Dana comes into memory while we, mere readers, are left only with history, really finding ourselves in the text only through our sympathy with Dana's dissatisfaction with her own book learning.

### **Written in the Body**

What does it mean to say that an author cannot touch the life of her protagonist, even as the protagonist of course has nothing that could properly be referred to as a life outside of the author? And what does this mean for a text like *Kindred*, which one may understand as a text written as its author's attempt to come to terms with her own relationship to a painful past? To get at this, it may help to turn for a moment to *Kindred's* central rule – Dana's obligation to life, which dictates that she can only return to her proper contemporary life [1323] when she believes she is dying. This mandate forms the second half of the ricochet motion that shuttles her between the two timespaces, the first half of course being the fact of Rufus's endangerment, which calls her to him whenever he believes that *he* is dying. In this way her transportation is thus mechanized by either character's encounter with an absolute limit. Dana's experience of being transported between two distinct times and places by the fear of her own death resonates with therapist and anthropologist Roberta Culbertson's description of the spatial and temporal splitting experienced by people in instances of repeated and violent violation, experiences that are often later described by her patients as remembered experiences of faraway places inaccessible to anyone except them. In the wake of such experiences, tormentors might actually be recalled as monsters, bedrooms as dungeons, and so on. Through wounding the body is projected into a different time and space, tied to an event placed away from other people and from daily life.

It is important to note that, in Culbertson's estimation, these places are not metaphorical, for they have been literally experienced under terms as fantastic as the language that comes to describe them. The experiences of such places instill in the wounded a new set of rules and boundaries, which have no reason to remain beholden to conventional distinctions between the real and the fake, the material and the hallucinatory. Wounding inaugurates a difficult temporality, insofar as such an experience is only knowable to the self as it has occurred to the self, thus flourishing in

a negative space whose language is a negative language: "No experience is more one's own than harm to one's own skin," Culbertson tells us, "but none is more locked within that skin . . . Trapped there, the violation seems to continue in a reverberating present that belies the supposed linearity of time and the possibility of endings" (170). In such a circumstance of harm, telling becomes less a problem of language and more a problem of time and space, a problem of a listener's inability to comprehend the contours of a distant place to which no one but the speaker will ever travel.<sup>6</sup>

In Culbertson's analysis, this distance is measured on a scale of inaccessibility, by the relative possibility of an experience's emergence from a deep interiority and thus the possibility of it entering discourse, of it carrying meaning in a world shared with others:

. . . the memory of trauma, or the knowledge of things past, is not merely of a wild and skewed time inaccessible except on its own terms, either in "flashbacks" or "neuroses" or in the form of the numb survivor self, but also the memory of other levels of reality, sensed not even by the five senses, but by the body itself, or by the spiritual mind, the interior of the body. This sort of memory is without language, perhaps without image. When such gross tools as language are brought to bear on the experience, the result appears to be metaphor, but it is not. As Terrence Des Pres says, in circumstances of extremity, "symbols tend to actualize." The world appears a different place, stuff and substance with a decidedly metaphorical quality. Was there a high mountain with trees? Yes, and no. (175-6)

Much as it is important not to mistake a survivor's language as metaphorical — metaphor presumes distance between sign and signified — it is to a further point problematic to conceptualize the body's desire *for* or negation *of* communicative "language" at all, for in the cases Culbertson works with all distances have collapsed, the signified *is* the sign, and [1324] the collapse of this distance changes the meaning of difference in the world.

In regards to *Kindred*, what should be taken from this is not quite a message about the impossibility of understanding the traumatic, for what Butler offers, via Culbertson, is something important about the temporality of knowledge more generally. As the philosopher Henri Bergson has noted:

the truth is that we shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it. Essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day. (135)

Bergson supports his claim with the simple observation that it is only one's consciousness of one's own body that determines what is experienced as past and present, and that "from the moment [memory] becomes image, the past leaves the state of pure memory and coincides with a certain part of [the] present" (140). In Bergson's

construction, involuntary memory and unconscious bodily gesture, spontaneous “truth-tellings,” come closer to true memory. Any other kind of recollection is always itself a narratization. Such stories never quite touch the past, even as we rely on such narratives for making meaning in the present.

In Culbertson’s illustration, what Bergson has articulated as a tension between an experienced moment and one’s recollection thereof becomes a struggle between what the body knows and the multiple cultural pressures brought to bear on how the body reports. As Culbertson notes, “What we normally call memory is not the remembered at all of course, but a socially accepted fabrication, a weaving together of the thin, sometimes delicate and intertwined threads of true memory, the re-membered, so that these [stories] might be told. Memory is always in the end subjected to those conventions which define the believable” (178).<sup>7</sup> In its syntax, Culbertson’s “re-membered” resonates with what Toni Morrison offers up as “rememory” in *Beloved*, with the poet Melvin Dixon’s notion of “re-membering” lost black diasporic communities, and with the Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan’s evocation of phantom pain, which also finds extension in Nathaniel Mackey’s rendition of the same phenomenon, when he describes a phantom limb as “a felt recovery, a felt advance beyond severance and limitation that contends with and questions conventional reality, that is a feeling for what is not there that reaches beyond it as it calls into question what is. . . . The phantom limb haunts or critiques a condition in which feeling, consciousness itself, would seem to have been cut off” (235).

It is here that one must come to wonder if *Kindred* is perhaps more sophisticated than it may at first seem, as Butler’s recourse to time travel is so successful in its representation of what might emerge out of the gap between what Bergson describes as pure memory and what Culbertson reminds to us as the social and historical demands of narrative. It is no accident that Butler makes both Kevin and Dana writers, who both become frustrated with their inability to put pen to paper after they return from their respective journeys to the past. Ironically, their writer’s block in fact dramatizes a readerly crisis, as neither Butler nor her characters can really understand the past as long as it is only a tale, a book. But by writing the tale as her protagonist’s experience of living as much in the past as in [1325] the present, Butler incarnates the historical – trumps the temporal – and thus evolves what could have been a very straightforward text about traumatic repetition into a book about haunting, into a text that stakes claim in the notion that one might be required to experience a past that is not proper to one’s self, but that nonetheless resonates with something in the self, a transmutation of history into an *experience* of reading, into a memory over which one can now claim ownership, rememory.

Though they are painfully successful readers, Dana and Kevin are, inevitably, failed writers. At the end of *Kindred*, Dana and Kevin travel to Maryland, hoping to uncover what happened to the people whom they had come to know in their time-travel. But the people they seek news of were slaves, and Kevin and Dana cannot learn how their stories ended because such stories were seldom archived. It is fitting, then, that in the

last pages of *Kindred* we are left with an image of Dana and Kevin, scarred, dismembered, and years beyond their proper ages, sitting on the steps of the Maryland Historical Society, commiserating in their knowledge that history has not preserved even for them the world they once knew. It is in this sense that Butler's time-traveling protagonist has perhaps supplied us with an apt metaphor for the experience not of history, but of trauma after all, for it is to the site of an historical damage that Dana travels, the sight of which consolidates and makes speak able the tension between herself and her white husband. *Trapped there, the violation seems to continue in a reverberating present that belies the supposed linearity of time and the possibilities of endings.*

Rather than think of Dana's travel as a literal transportation between separate times and places, consider her travel as instead made possible by the turning of her own body, folding inside out and back again. It is a journey into her own interiority, a place beholden to the facts of her own body's history. This journey, made possible by the genre, is one through which symbols indeed "tend to actualize," as the act of reading becomes an enactment of the text, which for the reader is a book, but for Dana, her own body, a body that bespeaks history – think here, even, of how much we are made to understand Dana resembles Alice, Rufus' slave concubine/Dana's distant foremother: this body incarnates history, as the traumatizing elements of Dana's past are made accessible to herself, thus collapsing the boundary between the self as a self and the self as another, collapsing the boundary between now and then. In *Kindred*, this reverberation is literalized through the conventions of science fiction, yet it is in fact best understood as an act of reading taken to the absolute extreme of the reader becoming the text, perhaps in fact realizing that she has been the text all along: an absolute identity.

### **Trauma is for the Living**

We must wonder: why Dana? Why must *she* bear the burden of this story? As a protagonist, Dana is a proxy for the author's own experiences of haunting, and enables Butler's otherwise impossible mission: to show how she as reader can never know her ancestors' experiences, but that she can nonetheless represent their stories, not by retelling their stories, but by instead forcing her protagonist to continually encounter the limits of her own knowledge, the archival past she has herself constructed through her consumption of [1326] cultural products, mainly film and history texts. It is as if Butler puts Dana in an historically mimetic space, and forces her to encounter the schism between a sense of reality and its representation, between social history and mimesis. *Kindred*, in this sense, is like a trip to Colonial Williamsburg gone terribly wrong, as the barrier between consuming the cultural product and becoming that product deteriorates – the real sign of a successful immersion in history. Dana becomes the history that she has consumed, and, when thought of this way, *Kindred* becomes less explicitly about a woman's travel to a troubled past and more about an individual's experience of reading about his or her own past, about coming to understand the contours of places that are otherwise and technically inaccessible to us, even as they constitute us. It is our resistance to slipping between is and isn't, self and non-self, that

keeps our relationship to the past a mere shade away from an absolutely uncanny modality, that keeps us from over-experiencing history's reverberations, as Dana has.

In *Kindred*, history's reverberations, like experiences of the uncanny, seem generated by sensational, in this case visual, cues – the apotheosis being the notion that Dana must travel to the past in order to see herself in the present. There is something suspicious about this, which can perhaps help us with this question of “why Dana?” At the novel's core we find a domestic tale. In fact, if one were to take away the tale's more fantastical elements, one would be left with the simple story of a newly married couple challenged by their ongoing encounter with the wife's familial past. But when subjected to science fiction's capacity for actualization, the story takes on epic proportions, as a personal problem is thematically enlarged, here coming to carry the burden of a sexual relationship's historical reverberations: There is a white man and a black woman; they are married. One day, the wife finds herself catapulted into the past, where she is forced to live as a slave. Eventually, he too makes the trip, so that their married relationship becomes one of a master and his slave concubine, thus formally mirroring the historical relationship responsible for one of the most troubling truths at the core of her own identity.

Attached to such a tale is a sense of guilt regarding interracial romance, or more specifically, a muted awareness of what loving white men, like wearing red, might invite back to the woman herself. For even despite the hints at recuperation in Kevin and Dana's relationship, it is clear that the facts of history will keep it a tenuous enterprise, forever further beholden to history's reverberations. Indeed, if one were to melt together the reverberations that *Kindred* maps across historical time, one would be left with a single word: *rape*. Butler seldom uses it, but it is always there. Hyperpresent even in its silence, its fact and threat superimposes onto the text another structure of relation that moves across time and space, the contrapuntal rationale to Dana's obligations to life – “No”: rape; “I don't feel safe anymore”: rape; “not as my master, not as my lover”: rape. The fact of sexual violence permeates *Kindred*, much as it pervades the very convoluted imbrications of race and kinship at the backbone of post-encounter civilization in the New World. Whenever Dana appears in the present with the scars and bruises she has sustained in her slave past in Maryland, her friends and family assume she got them from Kevin. You get a sense that they feel sorry for her.

A white man dating a black woman. The couple will always draw black looks, the black gaze: *Don't you know that they raped our women?* The question, which collects and articulates the onlooker's backward gaze (through the woman – who has now become an unspeaking and transparent object gelled in her country's historical legacy of rape and violence), takes away historical wonder's play and enchantment, for who could ever say “yes”? [1327]

Historical imbrication can be one of the most tortuous and ironic realities of an individual's necessary social existence. In *Kindred*, the bleeding of the past into the present is played out most strikingly in the visual, as the image of Kevin and Dana

together channels for some onlookers' thoughts of previous crimes and victimizations, makes present structures of relation that shaped the lives of their ancestors, of people who looked just like Kevin, just like Dana, and just like themselves. Such ghosting is vital, for it is a way of mapping one's way through the forests of misrecognition and uncanny synonymies, and it is this move, from making wounds to feeling and sharing pain, that helps our stumble towards dismantling structures of power, helps us reconfigure and re-imagine our relations to each other. As Culbertson notes, "Violence is always and necessarily about wounding... Wounding, the penetration of the skin, is the baseline, the reference point, of all violence, and of all power relationships sustained by violence" (179). She goes on to note that

Clearly, wounding results in pain, and so the two are intimately related; they differ in that pain is only sometimes a result of the eminently social process of wounding, and that wounding always causes some sort of pain, even if, as in the deep wounding of soldiers in the heat of battle, it might not be sensed at the moment. More simply, wounding is, as I use the term, a social act; pain is a state of being, an experience. (Culbertson 179)

During her second travel to Maryland, Dana narrowly escapes being raped by a white patroller. When she first returns to her own home, she, in a frenzy, attacks Kevin, unable at first to recognize him as her white husband and not as the white patroller. Later, worried that she may be taken to the past again, Kevin reveals the anxiety the episode has brought to him: "Do I look like someone you can come home to from where you may be going?" (51). Dana's time travel makes apparent a scar in her and Kevin's relationship, as now they must necessarily experience the pain, even though they did not make the wound. It is an historical wound, and we must wonder if Kevin and Dana's marriage heals or opens it. To paraphrase Culbertson, *wounding is a social act; haunting is an experience*.

*Kindred* is not a novel that works to revise or counter extant histories, but rather one that works to establish a sense of the already-written, and thus open a category that may rightfully be called the *always*, that which must always, necessarily, be repeated and re-experienced in the name of the future. Most people, from professor to third grader, can espouse the benefits of knowing one's history, most often asserting that we must learn history so that history does not repeat itself. I must admit, I have never quite understood this claim, which I find much akin to the deterrent model of criminal justice. The fact of jail does not prevent most crime; the fact of the Holocaust did not prevent, for instance, ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, just as Argentina's "disappearances" did not prevent disappearances in Guatemala. In other words, there is little evidence that perpetrators learn from history. However, by making Kevin and Dana's relationship a healing force, Butler moves us toward a sense of therapeutic regeneration in interracial love. But this therapy, like the process of coming to identify with one's own history, does not come without risk and comes at considerable cost. Every time Kevin and Dana make love, usually after she has returned from the past, he hurts her even as he heals her, chafing her bruises and reopening her cuts, reminders of the scenes of brutal

violence she faced at the hands of white [1328] men only moments before. By not disavowing her pain, but at the same time knowing what wounds her (and not doing it), Kevin, in their lovemaking, simultaneously reminds her *of* and also screens her *from* a reiteration of her own possible degradation.

It is this friction between pleasure and pain, between damage and recuperation, that indicates the alternative and potentially transformative space that makes Dana's time travel possible in the first place. In *Kindred*, transgression enables transportation, as history's lesson can only be revealed to those who violate the mandate it has placed on the future. One "only" need "see" history to discover, to remember, why such mandates are necessary, which is why history's lessons are always, only, mere repetition. Meanwhile, Dana's present—love—opens her to the facts of rape and coercion in her past—violence. At this juncture comes the fruition of the recuperative possibilities of learning history, both as an individual awakening and as a pedagogical exercise: Perpetrators don't learn from history, victims do. *Don't you know that they raped our women? "Yes." Do I look like someone you could come home to? "Yes."*

## Footnotes

\* A version of this essay also appears in *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture* by Marisa Parham (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

1. When I teach Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I do an exercise in which I ask students if what Mr. Flint (Jacobs's owner who spends years trying to make her his concubine) feels for Jacobs could be called love. They are always at first horrified by my question, but it accomplishes the goal. To consider the question, the narrative's players have to be brought into an uncanny relation: reading the scripts of power and rape and coercion and even terror often seems straightforward for students, because they are already looking for those relations. But upon this kind of reading, Harriet Jacobs, whom they always immediately script only as victim, unexpectedly emerges more fully as an agent, an emergence only possible through a consideration of Mr. Flint's human feeling toward her, as horrifying and ugly as it may be.
2. Interestingly, as with *Kindred* it is difficult to determine *Fledgling*'s genre. Neither text is particularly concerned with the mechanisms behind their more fantastic elements—the vampire Ina of *Fledgling* may or may not have come from another planet eons ago; the time travel device in *Kindred* is consistently subordinated to its effect. But in their concerns with questions of ancestry, with the meaning of past relations to one's possibility for a future, both novels fit very neatly alongside Butler's other novels.
3. In her first two series Butler is primarily concerned with a broad and deep constellation of bioethical questions, the answers to which carry significant implications not only for the configuration of our human social and political worlds,



but also for the very question of what it means to be human. Later repackaged into a single volume as *Seed to Harvest* in 2007, the *Patternist* novels comprise the first of several multi-novel series she would pen over the course of her career; the *Patternist*'s transhistorical narrative begins in seventeenth century Africa and follows the slave trade across the Atlantic. The series ends in a very distant American future. The *Xenogenesis* titles, set in a distant alien future, were repackaged into a single volume as *Lilith's Brood* in 2000, and comprise the second series. The third and final series is comprised of the *Parable* tales, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and is set in a dystopian near-future. The divergence of the *Parable* texts from the breeding and genetics narrative of the previous two series is consistent with Butler's move toward offering new or radicalized perspectives on the religious rather than on the biological, which characterizes some of her later fiction.

4. As Butler herself has noted in a commentary on "Bloodchild," a short story, much of her writing begins with "wondering how much of what we do is encouraged, discouraged, or otherwise guided by what we are genetically." True to form she then goes on to illustrate her point, demonstrating as always how a shift in perspective forces a re-evaluation of the whole: "We carry as many as 50,000 different genes in each of the nuclei of our billions of cells. If one gene among the 50,000... can so greatly change our lives – what we can do, what we can become – then what are we?" (*Bloodchild* 69).
5. Speaking of synonymies, it is hard not to note how much of Dana's working life is based on Butler's. In her interview with Charles Rowell, Butler points out that many of the soul-killing jobs Dana holds in *Kindred* are the same kind of jobs Butler herself worked at to keep a roof over her head. But the coincidence that is most interesting comes from Butler's response to the kind of work her own mother, a domestic, wanted Butler to obtain: "Her big dream for me was that I should get a job as a secretary and be able to sit down when I worked. My big dream was never to be a secretary in my life. I mean, it just seemed such an appallingly servile job, and it turned out to be in a lot of ways. I can remember watching television, which is something, of course, that my mother as a child never had access to, and seeing secretaries on television rushing to do their bosses' bidding and feeling the whole thing to be really kind of humiliating" (Interview 51). Dana is also encouraged to go to secretarial school, which she hates and soon drops out of, choosing instead to work as a temp (which is interesting in its own right, as Dana and her colleagues in *Kindred* dub the temp agency they work for "the slave market.") Also, as Kevin becomes more successful, he asks her more often to take care of secretarial tasks for him, an indicator, perhaps, of the nonetheless skewed balance of power in their otherwise equal relationship, as she ends up performing for him tasks she had before rejected.
6. Culbertson's assessment broadens some of the work that has come from other writers interested in framing and problematizing human responses to traumatic events, as

this point regarding the spatial and temporal singularity of an individual's experience intersects nicely, for instance, with a claim Dori Laub makes in "Bearing Witness": that what we may often refer to as crises of witnessing may in fact be crises in listening. That responsibility for the problem of representation may as well lay with the listener as it might with the teller (60-61).

7. Culbertson emphasizes the dangers inherent to this process:

The demands of narrative for their part operate in fact as cultural silencers to this sort of memory, descending immediately upon an experience to shape notions of legitimate memory, and silencing the sort of proto-memory described. We lose sight of the body's own recall of its response to threat and pain, and of the ways in which it 'speaks' this pain, because this wordless language is unintelligible to one whose body is not similarly affected, and because without words the experience has a certain shadowy quality, a paradoxical unreality. (178)

### Works Cited

Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

Google ScholarCheck AC Links

Butler, Octavia E. *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. New York: Seven Stories, 2005.

— — —. Interview by Charles H. Rowell. *Callaloo* 20.1 (1997): 47-66.

— — —. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon, 1988.

Crossley, Robert. Introduction. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon, 1988.

Culbertson, Roberta. "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self." *New Literary History* 26.1 (1995): 169-95.

Dixon, Melvin. "The Black Writer's Use of Memory." *History and Memory in African-American Culture*. Ed. Robert O'Meally and Geneviève Fabre. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.

Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Foster, Guy Mark. "Re-mapping Interracial Desire in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *African American Review* 41.1 (2007): 143-64.

Gilyard, Keith. "Genopsycholinguisticide and the Language Theme in African-American Fiction." *College English* 52.7 (1990): 776-86.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

Hogan, Linda. *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl. The Classic Slave Narratives*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates. New York: New American Library, 1987.

Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening." Felman and Laub 57–74.

Long, Lisa. "A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*." *College English* 64.4 (2002): 459–83.

Mackey, Nathaniel. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1993.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Parham, Marisa. *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Copyright © 2009 The Johns Hopkins University Press